GRAVEYARD TREE
by Nicole W

I've been living in this town all my life. For as long as I can remember, really. Walking by the cemetery as I do every day on my way to home when something catches my eye. An old, twisted tree, right in the middle of the cemetery. The only bit of life in a place without any. Its huge roots snaking through the grass. Its long branches spread out, and withered leaves forming a canopy of shade. Despite its gloomy appearance, there were a few birds perched in the tree, singing cheerful tunes. But the way the tree looked, curving towards the sun, the hole in the trunk where the wildlife waited out the worst of storms and all the other small details. It was the same tree from my dreams.

Every night, I saw that tree. The full moon shining, light illuminating the tree through the fog, making it look even more eerie. A boy kneeling at the base, burying a box. I would always approach to try and get a glimpse at what he was burying, but he would always see me first and the dream would end. I wanted to go investigate but not yet. Not now, in broad daylight. I returned home as usual and went about the rest of my day like always. I finished my homework and had dinner. After I had dinner, I went back to my room and prepared. I packed my backpack with a small trowel, a flashlight and anything else I might need. I went to bed and pretended to sleep. After a while and I was sure my parents were asleep, I snuck out to investigate the tree. The night was foggy, like it always was in my dreams. It was cool, but I could still feel chills through my coat whenever the wind picked up. I rode my bike to the cemetery, the moon lighting the way. I could hear owls in the distance as I arrived at the cemetery.

I left my bike at the entrance and took out my flashlight to light the way. An aura of mystery hung over the place. I approached the tree cautiously and as I got closer, it felt strangely warmer, though it might just be the tree blocking the wind. I got to the tree and knelt at the base where I had seen the boy and began digging with my trowel. The soil was soft and damp, I could feel it soaking through my jeans, but it made it quite easy to dig. As I dug, I kept getting the feeling of something watching me, but as I turned around, I saw nothing but fog, though it looked displaced as if something *had* been there. I kept on digging in the dirt until my trowel finally hit something with a metallic *clang*. I shone my flashlight in the small hole and saw some sort of metal reflecting the light back. I reached in and pulled out the box I'd seen so many times before. I dusted off the dirt and was finally able to get a good look at it. It looked so nice now that I was able to see it up close and inspect it. It didn't look too special, really. Just a plain wooden chest lined with a bit of metal. The metal might have once been precious, but after being buried for who knows how long, it seems to have lost its shine. I opened the chest, which had a soft velvet lining. The only thing inside the chest was a key on a chain. I picked it up and held it up to my flashlight to better inspect it. It

seemed to have been handmade, but with such attention to detail, it was beautiful. *But why was this key buried? Did it unlock something important and had to be hidden away? And why in the middle of a cemetery of all places?* I put the chain on as a necklace and tried to see if there was anything else useful in the chest. After feeling around for a while, I found a bit of folded paper tucked away behind the velvet lining.

I unfolded it, but it was too faded to read properly. It looked as though it could have been a map of some sort, thought it wasn't useful now that you can't read it. I set down the chest and got up to look around the tree and see if there might be anything else. I could never get close enough to the tree in my dreams to ever see the other side, I thought there might be something. I walked around to the other side to check, but there wasn't anything. I was walking back to the chest when my flashlight caught something shiny and reflected back at me. I went back and saw a small hole. It looked like a keyhole. I tried to put the key in, and it fit. I turned the key and heard a soft *click*. A tiny door swung out from the tree. *A door? Why is there a door?* I knelt again and shone my flashlight through the doorway.

 I couldn't see anything, just what looked like a hollowed tree, but a small light began to shine from the bottom. I felt the urge to go in. *But this can't be safe. I can't even see the bottom. I would fall in like Alice.* I suddenly heard footsteps from behind me. I jolted up and saw the boy from my dreams. It was interesting to see him up close. He looked at me with an indifferent expression, not saying anything. His stare felt like it was piercing through me, and I had to say something. "Uh...um hello...?" I said softly. His expression changed, as though he'd only just noticed I was there. He held out his hand to me, as though he wanted me to take it. "Uh...sorry? Do you want me to take your hand?" I asked him. I slowly raised my hand to take his, still cautious of the strange boy. I guess I was too slow for him because he grabbed my hand and dragged me through the little doorway. I yelped as we fell through the door. *Definitely falling like Alice.* And so, began the adventure...